

Survey and Research Report on the Builders Building



1. **Name and location of the property:** The property known as the Builders Building is located at 312 W. Trade Street in Charlotte, North Carolina.
2. **Name and address of the current owner(s) of the property:**

The current owner of the Builders Building is:

The Peace Building Inc.

312 West Trade Street, Suite 300

Charlotte, NC 28202-1665

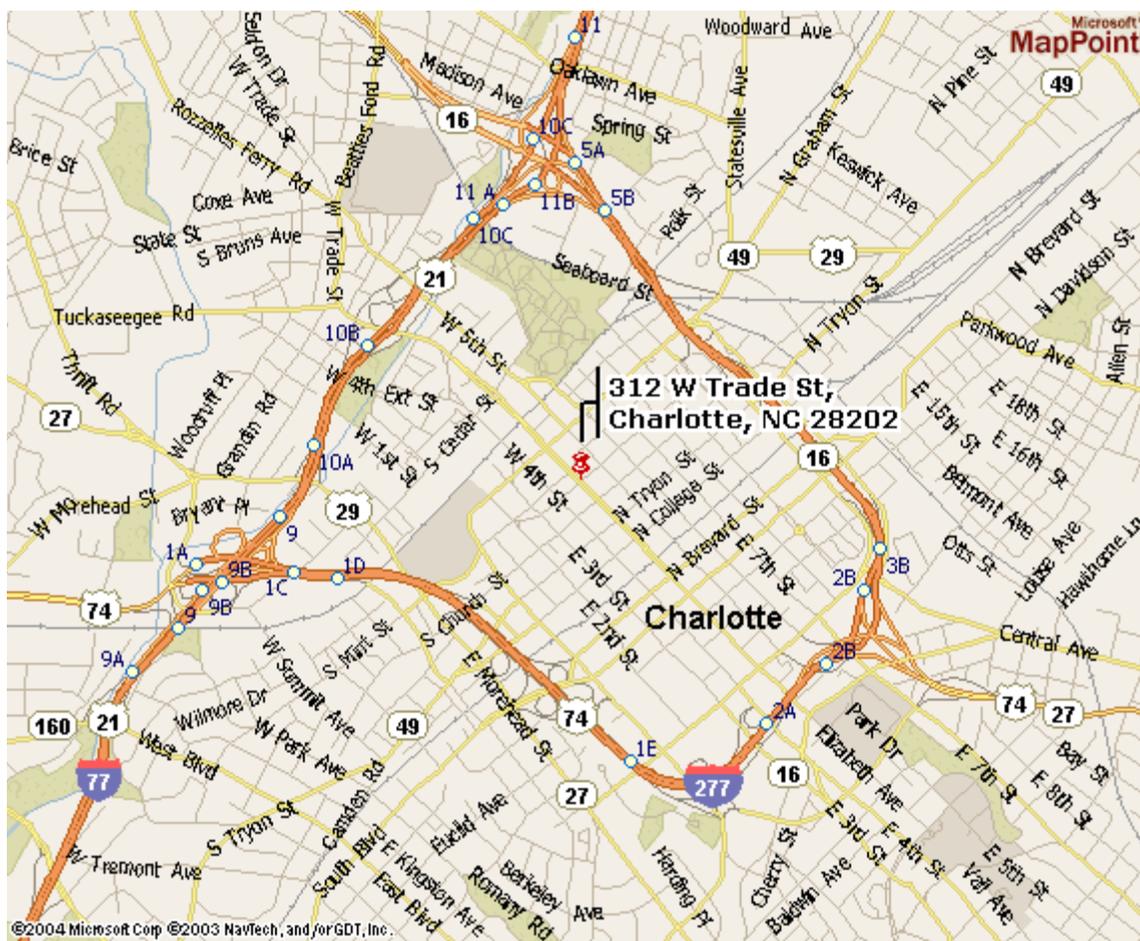
The current owner of the land on which the Builders Building sits is:

First Presbyterian Church

200 West Trade St.

Charlotte, N.C. 28202

3. **Representative photographs of the property:** This report contains representative photographs of the property. [Click here for photographs.](#)
4. **A map depicting the location of the property:** This report contains a map depicting the location of the property. The U.T.M. of the property is 17 514092E 3898471N



5. **Current deed book reference to the property:** The most recent deed to the Builders Building can be found in Mecklenburg County Deed Book 5042, page 993. The Parcel Identification Number of the property is 078-016-13B. The property is zoned UMUD.
6. **A brief historical sketch of the property:** This report contains a brief historical sketch of the property prepared by Dr. Dan L. Morrill.

7. **A brief architectural description of the property:** This report contains a brief architectural description of the property prepared by Dr. Dan L. Morrill.
8. **Documentation of why and in what ways the property meets the criteria for designation set forth in N.C.G.S. 160A-400.5.**
 - a. **Special significance in terms of its history, architecture, and/or cultural importance.** The Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission judges that the Builders Building possesses special significance in terms of Charlotte-Mecklenburg. The Commission bases its judgment on the following considerations:
 1. The Builders Building, erected in 1926-27, marked an important milestone in the history of the construction industry in Charlotte, because it represented the first effort of contractors, architects, and components manufactures to create a builders exchange in this community.
 2. Charles E. Lambeth, the financier of the Builders Building, was an important figure in New South Charlotte, including serving as Mayor from 1931 until 1933.
 3. M. R. "Steve" Marsh, the architect for the Builders Building, was a leading architect in Charlotte and its environs from 1922 until 1964.
 - b. **Integrity of design, workmanship, materials, feeling, and association.**

The Commission contends that the architectural description prepared by Dr. Dan L. Morrill demonstrates that the exterior of the Builders Building meets this criterion.
9. **Ad Valorem Tax Appraisal:** The Commission is aware that designation would allow the owner to apply for an automatic deferral of 50% of the Ad Valorem taxes on all or any portion of the property that becomes a designated "historic landmark." The current appraised value of the Builders Building is \$1,585,700.

Date of preparation of this report:

August 9, 2004

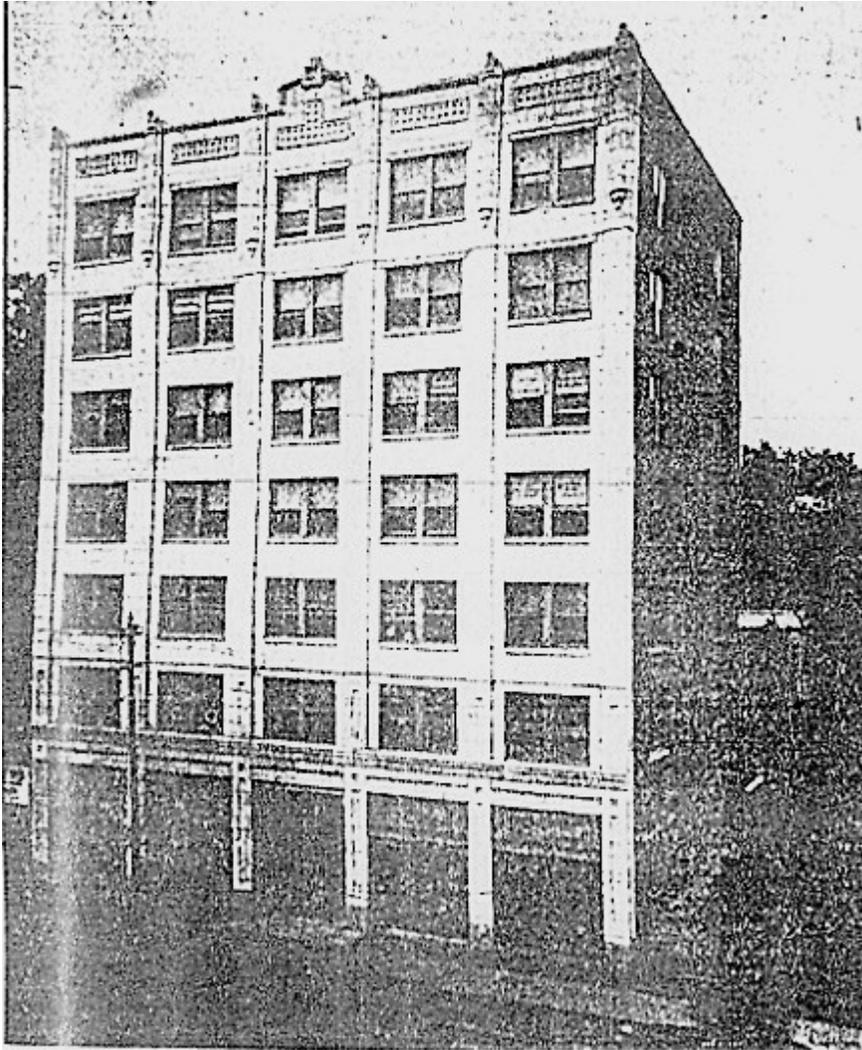
Prepared by:

Dr. Dan L. Morrill

Statement of Significance:

Summary

The Builders Building was designed by Charlotte architect and engineer Marion Rossiter "Steve" Marsh (1901-1977) and constructed in 1926-27 in response to the building boom that was occurring in Charlotte and its environs during the years immediately following World War One. Its purpose was to provide a single home for the principal participants in Charlotte's building trades. The bringing together of firms involved in the building trades was especially popular in those communities, such as Charlotte, that were dedicated to unremitting growth and expansion. This concentration of architects, general contractors, and components manufacturers, it was argued, would allow construction professionals to respond more effectively to the increasingly complex building systems that were appearing in urban centers of the United States, including those in North Carolina, in the early twentieth century.



A photograph of the Builders Building in 1927

Charles E. Lambeth was instrumental in bringing the Builders Building to fruition. A native of Fayetteville, N.C., Lambeth had located here after graduating from the University of North Carolina. Like so many Charlotte businessmen of his era, Lambeth was a champion of entrepreneurial enterprise. He wanted Charlotte to become a truly substantial place and believed that locating construction businesses in a single edifice would advance that goal.

M. R. "Steve" Marsh, a native of Jacksonville, Fla., came to Charlotte in 1916 as chief draftsman for the architectural firm headed by James Mackson McMichael (1870-1944). In 1922 Marsh opened his own architectural and engineering company in Charlotte and continued to head the firm until his retirement in 1964. That Marsh received the contract to design the Builders Building was a real feather in his cap, so to speak, because the new edifice was to be a showcase of what construction professionals could accomplish. The design philosophy for the Builders Building emphasized modernity.

Stylistically, the Builders Building appealed to the business elite's preference for traditionalist designs that reflected the conservative political, social, and economic values that dominated the era of White Supremacy in North Carolina. Its predominant architectural feature and the one that gives the buildings its essential aesthetic character is its regular fenestration.

Historical Background Statement

The Builders Building was designed by Charlotte architect and engineer Marion Rossiter "Steve" Marsh (1901-1977) and constructed in 1926-27 in response to the building boom that was occurring in Charlotte and its environs during the years immediately following World War One. Among its tenants were realtors, architects, surveyors, general contractors, and accountants, to mention only a few. "It was intended to house the offices of all of Charlotte's contractors and builders," writes historian Thomas W. Hanchett, "in order to facilitate sharing of technical information and hiring of subcontractors, part of a nationwide movement for 'builders exchanges' that had begun around the turn of the century."



Drawing of the Builders Building. Note the arcade extending to the rear.

The bringing together of firms involved in the building trades was especially popular in those communities, such as Charlotte, that were dedicated to unremitting growth and expansion. This concentration of architects, general contractors, and components manufacturers, it was argued, would allow construction professionals to respond more effectively to the increasingly complex building systems that were appearing in urban centers of the United States, including those in North Carolina, in the early twentieth century. A city like Charlotte, "with its access to money, position, and information encouraged change and growth, adaptation and adjustment," write the authors of *Architects and Builders in North Carolina. A History of the Practice of Building*. They continue: "While architects and builders gave up a certain amount of independence and control of their lives and jobs, they also assimilated the

changes brought on by the industrialization of the building process into a way of working that could take advantage of the progress and prosperity the new economy and society seemed to offer.”

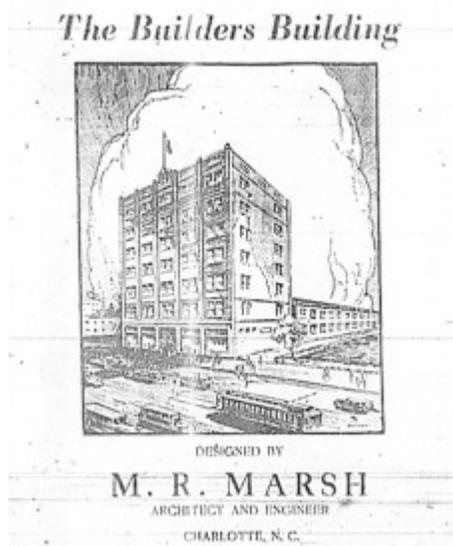
The impetus for constructing a home for Charlotte’s builders began in 1925. “The proposition was discussed fully in business conferences, at clubs in informal conferences,” reported the *Charlotte Observer*. The original concept was for the tenants of the building to buy stock and thereby provide the necessary financing. When this arrangement failed to materialize, V. P. Loftis, executive secretary of the North Carolina branch of the General Contractors Association, approached insurance executive and future Charlotte mayor Charles E. Lambeth (1894?-1948), who agreed to loan the money to enable the project to move forward. Architect M. R. Marsh was also involved in these negotiations.

It was altogether fitting that Charles Lambeth was instrumental in bringing the Builders Building to fruition. A native of Fayetteville, N.C., Lambeth had located here after graduating from the University of North Carolina. His wife was Laura Cannon Lambeth, a daughter of James William Cannon, a major figure in the Carolina textile industry and a man of great wealth. Like so many Charlotte businessmen of his era, Lambeth was a champion of entrepreneurial enterprise. He wanted Charlotte to become a truly substantial place and believed that locating construction businesses in a single edifice would advance that goal. “Few buildings for such a purpose exist in the south,” the *Charlotte Observer* announced. “There is one in Baltimore. One of somewhat similar purpose in Atlanta. Charlotte is the sole city between these two to have such a structure.”

Newspaper articles published at the time the Builders Building was completed in July 1927 express the New South creed of urban “boosterism” that men like Lambeth and his rich father-in-law supported. “If the architects, painters, plasterers, electrical men, and others, had not been the type of men to develop with the city it is extremely doubtful if Charlotte could have grown,” proclaimed the *Charlotte Observer*. The newspaper continued: “Every year the number of new constructions in the city has grown. Each year the aggregate figures for building permits has mounted.”

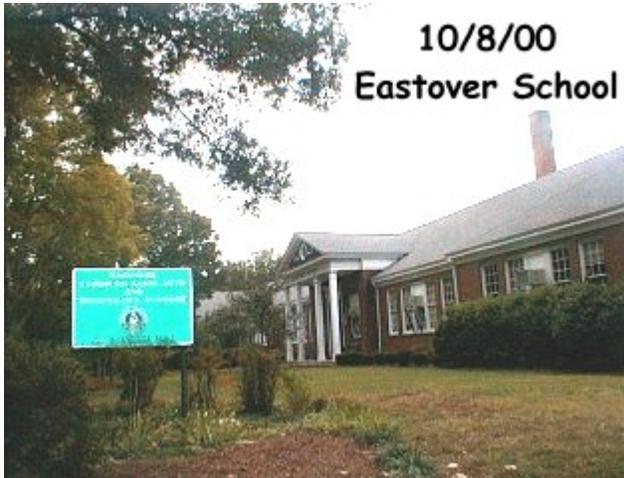
M. R. “Steve” Marsh, a native of Jacksonville, Fla., came to Charlotte in 1916 as chief draftsman for the architectural firm headed by James Mackson McMichael (1870-1944). He next worked as an engineer for Peter Spence Gilchrist (1861-1947), a chemical engineer who specialized in the installation of sulfuric acid plants. In 1922 Marsh opened his own architectural and engineering company in Charlotte and continued to head the firm until his retirement in 1964. “He was one of the pioneer architects in North Carolina,” said one of his associates. Marsh designed an impressive array of structures in Charlotte and the region during his 42-year career. Among his local jobs were Temple Israel, the Charlotte Coca-Cola Bottling Plant, the Oasis Temple, Selwyn Avenue Presbyterian Church, the South Branch

Library in Myers Park, the Charlotte Armory Building, Chantilly Elementary School, Morris Field, plus many more, including several residences.



The advertisement for Marsh appeared in the *Charlotte Observer* in July 1927

That Marsh received the contract to design the Builders Building was a real feather in his cap, so to speak, because the new edifice was to be a showcase of what construction professionals could accomplish. The structure, which originally had a two-story arcade extending behind the seven-story high-rise at the front, was intended to be an advertisement of sorts for the building arts. “Charlotte latest addition to its major buildings is perhaps more characteristic of its vast construction program in the past few years than any other building in the city,” trumpeted the *Charlotte Observer*. Located on the site of the home where Confederate General Stonewall Jackson’s widow had resided for many years after the Civil War, the Builders Building cost approximately \$300,000 to erect and appoint. J. P. Little and Sons was the general contractor; and the great majority of the subcontractors were also local firms, including the Grady Sign Co for signage, J. D. Love for plastering, and the Acme Plumbing and Electrical Company for wiring and plumbing.



Marsh was architect for [Eastover School](#), which opened in 1935.



Marsh also designed Chantilly School, the first school built in Charlotte after World War Two.

The design philosophy for the Builders Building emphasized modernity, at least within the context of the 1920s. Insisting that Charlotte was “destined to be one of the South’s greatest cities,” Lambeth and his associates wanted the “modern –fire proof-seven Builders’ Building” to be a symbol of Charlotte’s economic prowess and promise. The seven-story high rise portion of the structure was not essential in terms of function. Its primary purpose was to serve as a symbol of progress and financial strength. According to the authors of *Architects and Builders in North Carolina. A History of the Practice of Building*, the “symbolic importance” of skyscrapers as a “sign of progress, permanence, and prosperity was immeasurable.” Typical of the advertisements that appeared for subcontractors was that for McDaniel-Federal Co., suppliers of decorative tiles for the Builders Building. “IN ORDER that the Builders Building—representing as it does, the building interests of Charlotte and territory—might be modern in every way, Tile Wainscoting was used in the main lobby, or elevator entrance,” the advertisement proclaimed.

The Builders Building has experienced substantial change since it was completed in 1927, both physically and in terms of use. With the increased pace of suburbanization following World War Two, construction firms left the Builders Building and occupied offices mainly in outlying districts of the city, where ample parking for automobiles was readily available. The entire arcade portion of the building has been demolished, and the remaining high rise section contains none of its interior decorative appointments or defining interior spaces. Although a new elevator tower with bathrooms has been added to the rear, the high rise section does remain mostly intact on the exterior. The Builders Building does continue to house offices.

Architectural Context Statement

The 1920s was a decade of marked growth in Charlotte, including the construction of several major high rises in the center city. Their claims to be

“modern” to the contrary notwithstanding, these buildings were universally revivalist in terms of architectural style. Even the Independence or Realty Building, Charlotte’s first steel-framed skyscraper, was modified in 1927-28 to make it appear more “classical.” Other local high rises, such as the Johnston Building (1924), the Commercial National Bank Building, and the First National Bank Building (1926), likewise exhibited revivalist detailing.



Architect William L. Stoddard's Johnston Building was Charlotte's first Neo Classical style skyscraper.



Charlotte architect Louis Asbury, Sr. designed the First National Bank Building in the Neo Classical style.

Architectural historians ascribe the business elite’s preference for traditionalist designs to the conservative political, social, and economic values that dominated the era of White Supremacy in North Carolina. “Political power and legal control remained in the hands of the wealthy—whether former landed gentry or the newly rich industrialists—who hired architects and general contractors to create a fabric of building that was consonant with their values,” assert Catherine W. Bisher, Charlotte V. Brown, Carl R. Lounsbury, and Ernest H. Wood III. Architects and builders “attempted to meet the needs of the conservative capitalists and urban dwellers who swelled the population and the gross national product in a society that remained conservative politically and socially.” Thomas Hanchett contends that the local penchant for Neo-Classicism resulted in part from the emergence of

business leaders in Charlotte who were less willing than their predecessors to take risks. “The generation of New South leaders, including D. A. Tompkins, Edward Dilworth Latta, and George Stephens, who had taken enormous risks to turn the Piedmont into a major industrial region, were passing their power on to a new generation” says Hanchett. “The new leaders seemed much less adventuresome, willing to follow in the directions set by their predecessors. Their homes and offices reflected this increased interest in tradition over innovation, in social correctness rather than risk-taking.” The Builders Building fits readily within this framework. Its predominant architectural feature and the one that gives the buildings its essential aesthetic character is its regular fenestration, to which ornamentation on the facades is clearly subordinate.

Physical Description

The Builders Building is a rectangular, five-bay wide by three-bay deep, seven-story with basement, steel-framed high rise. It faces south and is located at 312 W. Trade Street just east of its intersection with N. Pine St. The lot, which is paved, slopes down slightly toward the north. The other structures that once fronted the 300 block of W. Trade St. have been destroyed, making the Builders Building stand alone. A two-story arcade that once extended northward from the rear of the building has been demolished, and an elevator tower with bathrooms and balconies and containing the main entrance to the building has been added in recent years. The building has a flat roof covered with stone. A brick structure that once housed original mechanical equipment is still atop the building. Except for some mechanical equipment in the basement, the interior of the building retains none of its original character.

The masonry-faced southern façade, the most prominent architectural feature of the Builder’s Building, retains much of its original physical integrity. The fenestration pattern is regular, with a pair of 1/1 double-hung sash in each bay ascending from the second to the top floor of the structure. The street level front consists of five bays, the center bay having a replacement entrance and the flanking bays having large, single-lighted, fixed windows. A classical masonry cornice molding adorns the first floor, and fluted pilasters with pedestals and finials flank each of the five bays on the top floor of the façade. Coffered-like masonry panels are above the windows on the top floor, and a masonry pediment surmounts the center bay of the façade.

The identical side elevations of the building are more modest. Sheathed in yellow-enamel brick laid in common bond, the facades have 1/1 double-hung sash in the outer bays, and six small, rectangular, fixed windows are on the first floor. Three header courses with the brick laid vertically decorate the facades, as do vertical string courses with masonry corner blocks.

Charlotte Observer, 17 July, 1927. This edition of the newspaper contains numerous articles on aspects of the Builders Building. The first mention of the plan to construct the Builders Building appears in the *Charlotte Observer*, 1 September, 1926. This article also contains a rendering of the building. Marsh's obituary article appears in *Charlotte Observer*, 5 September, 1977.

The first list of tenants of the Builders Building, initially called the Lambeth Building, appears in the *Charlotte City Directory* (1927), 1161.

Thomas W. Hanchett, n.d. "Charlotte Architecture: Design Through Time Part 2." <http://landmarkscommission.org/educationarchitecturept.2.htm>. Hereinafter cited as *Hanchett*.

For an overview of Charlotte-Mecklenburg history, including programs of economic expansion, see Dan L. Morrill, *Historic Charlotte. An Illustrated History of Charlotte & Mecklenburg County* (San Antonio, Texas: Historical Publishing Network, 2001).

Catherine W. Bisher, Charlotte V. Brown, Carl R. Lounsbury, and Ernest H. Wood III, *Architects and Builders in North Carolina. A History of the Practice of Building* (Chapel Hill & London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 292, 293. Hereinafter cited as *Bisher*.

Charlotte Observer, 17 July, 1927.

Ibid.

Dan L. Morrill, "Survey and Research Report on the Lambeth –Gossett House (<http://landmarkscommission.org/surveys&rlambethgossett.htm>).

Charlotte Observer, 17 July, 1927.

Charlotte Observer, 5 September, 1977. For a listing of the buildings designed by M. R. Marsh, see "The Work Of M. R. Marsh And Successor Architects," a manuscript in the Special Collections Department in the Atkins Library of the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, hereinafter cited as *Marsh*.

Marsh

Charlotte Observer, 17 July, 1927.

Charlotte Observer, 1 September, 1926.

Charlotte Observer, 17 July, 1927.

Ibid.

Bisher, 296.

Charlotte Observer, 17 July, 1927.

Dan L. Morrill and Ruth Little Stokes, "Survey and Research Report on the Independence Building," (<http://landmarkscommission.org/surveys&rindependence.htm>).

Charlotte North Carolina. Diversified Industrial and Commercial Center (Charlotte: The Observer Printing House, Inc., 1930).

Bisher, 294.

Bisher, 290.

Hanchett. The Builder's Building belongs most readily to what Marcus Whiffen calls the Commercial Style. This style thrived in Chicago as nowhere else. Structures of this genre were designed to meet the needs of commerce. Providing light and efficient space was stressed at the expense of exterior ornamentation. See Marcus Whiffen, *American Architecture Since 1780 A Guide to the Styles* (Cambridge and London: The M.I.T. Press, 1969), 183-190.



Builders Building in Minneapolis, Minnesota

Builders Exchange Building in San Antonio,